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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 001295

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: BURMESE GOVERNMENT HEADS FOR THE HILLS

REF: A. RANGOON 1276

[1](#)B. RANGOON 1275

[1](#)C. RANGOON 1265

Classified By: P/E Chief W. Patrick Murphy for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: As the first week of the GOB's relocation of the capital to remote Pyinmana comes to a close, it appears the move will encompass a more significant portion of the government than most observers initially expected. Up to a dozen ministries are already on the move, with more offices and senior military officials to follow. Despite GOB verbal announcements to diplomats and stringers on November 7, the official media has made no mention of the move, leaving the Rangoon rumor mill to fill the void on motivations. Leading theories, as far-fetched as they seem, point to the advice of astrologers or fear of a foreign invasion. Although the relocation is itself a stunning development, even for a regime notorious for its lack of predictability and logic, the well-educated civil service seems to be complying -- like sheep. End Summary.

EXODUS: MOVEMENT OF GOB PEOPLE!

[1](#)2. (SBU) Rangoon civil servants, residents, and foreign observers appear stunned at the widening scope of the military regime's relocation of Burma's "administrative capital" to remote Pyinmana. When the GOB began "Phase I" of the relocation on November 6, few believed that more than a handful of offices would be affected. As of November 10, however, significant portions of at least 10 ministries have already moved, with apparently more close behind.

[1](#)3. (U) Among the ministries already on the move to Pyinmana, located over 240 miles north of Rangoon, are Foreign Affairs; Information; Home Affairs; Health; Communications, Post, and Telegraphs; Hotels and Tourism; Energy; National Planning and Economic Development; Progress/Border Areas and National Races and Development Affairs; Transport; and Commerce.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Although contacts at several of these ministries have indicated that some personnel may remain in Rangoon to staff small "branch offices," in many cases it appears that entire departments and divisions are relocating. Among the more bizarre relocations (and there are many) is the "Seamen's Employment Control Division" (SECD) of the Ministry of Transport. The SECD processes thousands of Burmese seamen, most of whom arrive and depart the country via the port of Rangoon. They will now have to make the two-day round trip inland to Pyinmana to obtain their required permits.

[1](#)5. (C) On November 9, the Rangoon Division military commander, Lt Gen Myint Swe, told the Charge that he, too, would relocate to the new capital in his capacity as Chief of Military Affairs Security (septel). This was the first indication we've had that senior military officials will also join the migrating civil service. Chinese diplomats told Emboff that SPDC Chairman Than Shwe intends to stay in Rangoon, but senior ministers are not immune. The Minister of Health, for example, told us on November 8 that he expects to move soon and that he "thinks" the GOB will provide housing and office space for his numerous staff (ref B).

WHAT MOVE?

[1](#)6. (SBU) Even though diplomats and stringers were advised of the relocation on November 7 (ref C), the official media have reported not a word, despite dozens of daily convoys headed north, loaded with civil servants and government furniture. Most of those making the move received than 48 hours notification. All family members must stay behind in Rangoon, and some reports say that the GOB expects them to vacate government-provided housing within the next few months.

[1](#)7. (C) Initial reports from Pyinmana indicate minimal infrastructure, with up to five or six government employees sharing small dormitory-style rooms. According to several contacts, the GOB has responded to a handful of AWOL cases by quickly filing charges under Section 5(J) of the Emergency Provisional Act of 1950, which allows for administrative

sentencing, without trial, for periods up to seven years prison confinement.

18. (C) MFA officials confided to us that their Burmese Embassies abroad are now "temporarily" cut off from headquarters and "must rely on each other for assistance." The MFA's Americas Division Director, a former diplomat in Washington, called us on November 9 to say good-bye and joked that future invitations to U.S. Embassy functions should be accompanied by an air ticket.

WHAT MOTIVATION?

19. (C) The regime's virtual blackout on meaningful news has simply fed the already robust Rangoon rumor mill on motivations for the bizarre relocation of the capital. Much of the focus has been on the likelihood that SPDC Chairman Than Shwe, and he alone, made the decision, driven by whim, astrological advice, and/or self-aggrandizement. (Note: Ref A inadvertently identified Pyinmana as the hometown of SPDC chairman Than Shwe. He has spent time on military assignment in Pyinmana, but his actual hometown is Kyaukse, located further north in Mandalay Division. End Note.)

110. (SBU) Virtually every one of Burma's ancient kings, and Than Shwe fancies himself as having kingly qualities, moved the country's capital after assuming the throne. An early twentieth century book on Burma, compiled from old manuscripts on the building of Mandalay as a throne capital, advised that "this Royal habit of relocating the capital was placing a great strain on all creatures, monk and men, and animals, horses, cows, oxen, dogs, cats, not to mention the loss of lives of turtles and fish and shrimp in the abandoned moats."

11. (C) Though improbable, much of the speculation on motives has also focused on a view popular among locals that the regime fears a potential foreign invasion. In this regard, NLD leader U Lwin's historical information on his own government role in the 1960s and 1970s is quite telling: in every military exercise in which he participated, Pyinmana was the location of choice for a hypothetical war-time command center in the event of attack by India, China, or even the United States (ref A).

112. (C) According to press sources, a stringer for Reuters asked the Minister of Information at the GOB's November 7 press conference if the relocation to Pyinmana was related to any concern over a possible U.S. attack on Burma (a common rumor in Rangoon). The Minister replied, "How do you know about this? Did they inform you in writing?" An MFA official recently requested Emboff to procure a copy of "Stealth," a 2005 action movie starring Jamie Foxx which features a fictional air assault on a Rangoon Ministry of Defense facility. The official reported back that she had provided the video to her superiors, at their request, and commented that she hoped "this movie didn't have anything to do with the sudden move."

COMMENT: FOLLOW THE LEADER

113. (C) The regime's sudden relocation of the capital has stunned observers of a military regime notorious for its lack of predictability and logic. Although there has been some grumbling, the GOB's civil service, many of whom are well educated professionals, seems quietly resigned to heading north - like sheep. Some diplomats speculate that the regime's literal retreat to the hills of Pyinmana might be the straw that breaks the camel's back, already weighted by the SPDC's repression, corruption, and mismanagement. Huge fuel price increases and rising inflation, however, have not sparked any major outcry. As the first week of the relocation comes to a close, we don't see any visible signs that this latest perplexing regime decision will lead to revolt, either. End Comment.

VILLAROSA